

Forty-Two British Jews Against Israel's Annexation Plans

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Forty-two British Jews have signed a letter urging Israel not to annex any parts of the West Bank. They are apparently convinced that such a move would irreparably damage Israel, posing what they called an “existential threat.”

The story is at [the Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com).

Some of the most prominent and respected names in British Jewry have raised alarm over the Israeli government's plans to annex parts of the West Bank, saying such a move would be

an existential threat to Israel.

Among more than 40 signatories of an unprecedented letter to the Israeli ambassador to the UK are Sir Ben Helfgott, one of the best-known Holocaust survivors in Britain; the historians Sir Simon Schama and Simon Sebag Montefiore; the former Conservative foreign secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind; the lawyer Anthony Julius; the philanthropist Dame Vivien Duffield; the scientist Lord Robert Winston; the former MP Luciana Berger; the Times columnist Daniel Finkelstein; and the author Howard Jacobson.

These are 42 of the Great and Good, and their reputations relieve them, apparently, of the responsibility of studying, in depth, the history of Israel and the Arab Jihad being conducted against the Jewish state. Before presuming to preach to the Israelis about what they should or must do, these forty-two pukka sahibs and grand panjandrums ought to study the Balfour Declaration (1917), the Treaty of San Remo (1920), and above all, the precise terms of, and territories included within, the Mandate for Palestine (1922). Then they should look at Article 80 (the "Jewish people's article") of the U.N. Charter, and should study the meaning of U.N. Resolution 242 (1967), as eloquently supplied by its British author and U.N. Ambassador, Lord Caradon.

After they have fulfilled those tasks, they should study the history of the Zionist pioneers and the Arab terrorism against them from the very beginning of their enterprise, including the Arab Revolt (1936-1939) and the malign effect in Mandatory Palestine of that enthusiast for the Final Solution, Hajj Amin El Husseini. Then they may proceed to studying the formal founding of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, and the Jewish hand held out in peace that same day to the Arabs, only to be rejected by them. They should reexamine the invasion by five Arab armies, intent on destroying the nascent state of Israel and convinced of their quick victory which, in the

words of Egypt's Azzam Pasha, Secretary General of the Arab League, would be a "a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades."

These 42 Deeply Concerned British Jews should then study the history of the three major wars Israel has had to fight for its survival (1948-1949, 1967, 1973), and the smaller wars too, that it has been forced to fight against the terrorists of the PLO and Hezbollah, in Lebanon, and against Hamas in Gaza. They ought to review the long and difficult history of Israel's attempts to make peace with the Palestinian Arabs. Finally, they should consider the military significance of the Jordan Valley, and the legal, historical, and moral claim of Israel to Judea and Samaria (a/k/a "the West Bank"). All of that is a tall order, but the consequences of ignorance about such matters among Jews in the Diaspora could be a matter of life or death for Israel. Those who wish Israel well, before scolding that tiny state, have a duty to learn about all the matters I have listed just above

Their [the "42 British Jews"] letter to Mark Regev, conveying "concern and alarm" about the pledge by Israel's new coalition government to extend its territory over swaths of the West Bank, is the latest indication of mounting disquiet among British Jews over the plan.

Why should they have any "concern and alarm" if Israel chooses to exercise its claim, according to the Mandate for Palestine, to extend its sovereignty over all or, if it so decides, over only part, of "the West Bank"?

Could their "concern or alarm" reflect their misunderstanding of Israel's rights to the territory it proposes to annex? Those rights to "annex," or more exactly, to extend Israel's sovereignty, come from the legal claim based on the Mandate for Palestine. Let's remember that after World War I, when the

Ottoman Empire disintegrated, the mandates system was created by the League of Nations in formerly Ottoman lands. Several mandates were established on behalf of the Arab people; one was contemplated for the Kurds but never implemented; and one was the Mandate for Palestine, for the Jewish people, in order that there might be established a national home for the Jews in their ancient homeland that would in time become their state. Large swathes of formerly Ottoman territory in the Middle East were thus assigned by the League to various mandates. Aside from the Palestine Mandate, there were mandates as well for Iraq, and for Syria/Lebanon, while the Emirate of TransJordan was created out of territory east of the Jordan River "out to the desert," that originally was to have been part of Mandatory Palestine.

The signatories [the 42 British Jews] say their concerns are "shared by large numbers of the British Jewish community, including many in its current leadership, even if they choose not to express them".

The letter says: "We are yet to see an argument that convinces us, committed Zionists and passionately outspoken friends of Israel, that the proposed annexation is a constructive step. Instead, it would in our view be a pyrrhic victory intensifying Israel's political, diplomatic and economic challenges without yielding any tangible benefit.

"It would have grave consequences for the Palestinian people most obviously. Israel's international standing would also suffer and it is incompatible with the notion of Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state."

The unthinking acceptance by these 42 British Jews of the existence of the "Palestinian people" is worrisome. There are "Palestinian Arabs," but not a separate "Palestinian people," with a distinct religion, language, cuisine, fairy tales, customs, or anything else that would distinguish them from

other Arabs in the same neighborhood. It would have been useful if they had instead referred to "Palestinian Arabs."

They claim, too, not to have seen "an argument that convinces us...that the proposed annexation is a constructive step." What about the argument that extending Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and many of the settlements signals to the Arabs that their salami-tactics will not work, that Israel is here to stay, and with borders it can defend, and no amount of pressure by the "international community" will cause Israel to retreat from lands to which it has a claim superior to all others? Would holding onto that territory not strengthen Israel's power to deter its enemies, and thus make war less, not more, likely? And wouldn't forcing Israel to essentially concede control of the West Bank, and to return to those 1949 armistice lines, whet rather than sate, Arab appetites, and make a future war more likely?

Forty-two British Jews (all of them among the Great and the Good) have signed a letter delivered to Israel's ambassador to the U.K., Mark Regev, in which they express their fear that "Israel's international standing will suffer" if it extends its sovereignty to approximately 30% of the West Bank. This is true only if Israel's supporters, Jewish and non-Jewish, allow it to suffer by not making the best case for Israel's claim to the West Bank. It is "supporters" who are unwilling, or unable, to make the strongest case for Israel who cause Israel's "international standing" to suffer. If they truly care for Israel, these "42 British Jews" should first acquire the knowledge necessary in order to stoutly defend it, and that means both to understand and to bring to bear, in any discussion about Israel, and the Palestinian Arabs, both the Mandate for Palestine and U.N. Resolution 242. Having made the overwhelming case for Israel's claim to the West Bank, they can then, if they wish, still argue against annexation in a different way: "while Israel has a right to that territory, we think it nonetheless unwise for it to exercise that right" –

and then let the discussion be about the “wisdom” of enforcing the claim, rather than pretending that Israel’s superior claim does not exist. Israelis themselves are divided on the “wisdom” of annexation, but not on Israel’s right to do so.

The move would be seen as evidence of Israel’s rejection of a negotiated peace settlement involving the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state. This would inflame tensions locally and cause regional destabilisation, the letter says.

Israel has been trying ever since May 14, 1948 to make peace with the Arabs. And after every war, it has tried again to make peace. After the 1948-1949 war, Israel offered to make the armistice lines into permanent borders, upon the signing of peace treaties. The Arabs turned the offer down; they looked forward to a second, more successful assault on Israel and did not want “permanent borders” to get in the way. After the 1967 war, Israel’s offer to negotiate was met by the Arab League’s “Three No’s” at its meeting in Khartoum: “no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it.” Although Israel has managed to make peace with Egypt, by handing back the entire Sinai, and with Jordan, too, it has not managed to convince the Palestinian Arabs to make peace. In 2000, Ehud Barak offered Yassir Arafat 92% of the West Bank and control over half of the Old City of Jerusalem. Arafat turned it down, without any discussion. In 2008, Ehud Olmert offered Mahmoud Abbas a deal whereby Israel would retain only 6.3 percent of the West Bank, in order to keep control of major Jewish settlements, but would compensate the Palestinians with Israeli land equivalent to 5.8 percent of the West Bank; in addition, the Old City would be placed under international control. Abbas, like Arafat before him, turned the Israeli offer down. Since then it has been the Palestinian Authority, not Israel, that has rejected negotiations for a peace settlement.

And just now the Israelis have accepted the Deal of the Century, which would lead for the first time to the creation of an independent Palestinian state. That state would also be given a massive aid package of \$50 billion. Yet the “42 British Jews” insist that it is Israel that has rejected a “peace settlement involving the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state” when, in fact, that is exactly what Israel has just accepted. Those 42 British Jews may not like the fact that Israel still wishes to keep 30% of the West Bank, while offering in compensation land that is now part of Israel to be incorporated into the new state of Palestine, but they cannot claim that Israel has rejected what it has just accepted – “the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state.”

“The damage to Israel’s international reputation ... will be enormous,” the letter says, pointing out that the UK government has said it will oppose the annexation plan, and that the proposed move would bolster calls for boycotts and sanctions against Israel.

“The impact on diaspora Jewry and its relationship with the state of Israel would also be profound. The British Jewish community is an overwhelmingly Zionist community with a passionate commitment to Israel. We proudly advocate for Israel but have been helped in doing so by Israel’s status as a liberal democracy, defending itself as necessary but committed to maintaining both its Jewish and democratic status.

If the Trump Peace Plan were accepted, as Israel has said it is willing to do – while Mahmoud Abbas continues his nonstop tantrum – how does the Jewish state cease to be a liberal democracy? The Palestinians would have their own state, with 70% of the West Bank, 100% of Gaza, and two large swathes of territory in the Negev which Israel has agreed to hand over for inclusion in the new state of Palestine. 97% of

Palestinians will be able to remain exactly where they are today, and so will 97% of Israelis. What prevents Israel from continuing to be the same polity as before, “both Jewish and democratic”?

“A policy of annexation would call that into question, polarising Jewish communities and increasing the divisive toxicity of debate within them, but also alienating large numbers of diaspora Jews from engaging with Israel at all. Under these circumstances, the commitment to Israel that has been such a vital glue in sustaining and uniting Jewish communities, as well as an asset for Israel, will decline.”

The letter adds: “If asked to make the case for West Bank annexations, however, we will not be able to do so.”

The policy “not only lacks merit, but would pose an existential threat to the traditions of Zionism in Britain, and to Israel as we know it”.

It is surprising that British Jews would be so unaware of the Mandate for Palestine, given that Great Britain was the Mandatory entrusted by the League of Nations with the task of creating, with the Zionists, the Jewish National Home. Or do they think the provisions of the Mandate ceased to be relevant when the League of Nations went out of business? Can all of these distinguished people – and especially the historians among them – be unaware of Article 80 (the “Jewish people’s article”) of the U.N. Charter, which committed the U.N. to fulfill the provisions of any Mandates still existing? And can these 42 British Jews be unaware of what the articulate British ambassador to the U.N., Lord Caradon, said was the meaning of U.N. Resolution 242, which he wrote and which, he insisted, entitled Israel to retain any territory it won in the Six-Day War that it deemed necessary, in order that it might have “secure [i.e. defensible] and recognized boundaries”?

Those 42 British Jews are apparently unwilling to trouble themselves unduly – that is, to study the two independent bases for Israel’s claim to part, or all, of the “West Bank.” They have forgotten, or never knew, or cannot allow themselves to grasp, either the Mandate for Palestine or U.N. Resolution 242. They will be steadfast supporters of Israel, but only on their terms – that is, only so long as the Israelis are willing to yield to what the “international community” demands. They’re sorry, those 42 British Jews, but they simply can no longer support Israel if the Israelis insist on staking or making a claim to the West Bank. How dare those Jews in Israel make things difficult for us, in the Diaspora, who would be happy to support them, just as long as they aren’t too intent on making their case, and on presenting their legal, historic, and moral claim. We can only support the “good Israel,” the one that is willing to drop its claims to the West Bank, and instead agrees to yield to Palestinian demands, even allowing itself to be squeezed back within the pre-1967 lines, that is the 1949 armistice lines, which would again give Israel a nine-mile-wide waist at its narrowest point – from Qalqilya to the sea – the lines that Abba Eban famously called the “lines of Auschwitz.”

The attitude of these 42 British Jews puts one in mind of an old Jewish joke. Gallows humor. Two Jews, Baruch and Moshe, have been lined up against a wall to be shot. Just as they are being blindfolded, Moshe asks one of the armed men “please, could I have a cigarette”? Baruch gives him a furious look. “Moshe, why are you always making trouble?” That’s the attitude of those 42 British Jews – Israel, by daring to exercise its rights, is “always making trouble.”

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